

The Identity Joke: Race, Rap, Performance in *CB4*

Daniel Traber

Since their birth in the 1970s, hip-hop music and culture have repeatedly been framed as black cultural forms that give “urban” youth a voice in American society to speak the truth of their lived experience and feelings of political anger. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner are representative of this approach. They note:

Rap is thus at once a formidable form of musical expression, a subcultural means of opposition, a cultural idiom of counter-hegemonic anger and rebellion, and an indicator that existing societies are structured according to a system of differences between dominant and subordinate classes, groups, races, and genders. . . . Rap can force white audiences to reflect on their own racial construction, on the ways that whites oppress blacks, on the ways that their own subject positions are constructed in opposition to an Other who is often presented in a negative light. Rap is thus a significant part of the postmodern adventure that forces an increasingly multicultural and multi-racial society to become aware of its differences and to learn to live with otherness and dissimilarity.¹

Though optimistic, this assessment of hip hop as a political art form that questions whiteness as a political identity is a fair assessment, in spite of its totalization

of rap as a singular style/genre. Many black fans and critics often disparage nonblack fans, largely whites from non-urban environments for misappropriating their form of urban culture, a debate that has roots in rock n' roll, jazz, and even the minstrelsy. Although black fans and critics may have a point in their critique of white performativity of black cultural performance, what they may not analytically see is the meaning that various groups attach to a set of social practices or cultural inventions. Rather than seeing this form as mere racial imitation or racial fakery those whites are in fact positioning themselves in the world through their performances of certain genres of rap. The point is no one is truly a racial insider, especially in the tradition of performance. The dichotomy of insider and outsider makes little sense. Performance of any form of entertaining style is open to multiple meanings and interpretations. In short, racial identity is never fully transparent to anyone in American culture.

Hip hop is so thoroughly associated with blackness (even though Latino/as were equally important to the genesis of hip hop) that to separate the two is tantamount to genocide for the most committed fans and critics since African Americans dominate the form in the music industry. Most popular musical genres have a philosophy that shapes their aesthetics (e.g., how fans dress, behave, and discuss the idiom). These are its rules of identity and determine the fan's level of commitment to the musical. To propose hip-hop fans are following the rules of a musical culture rather than a race is an incendiary claim in the United States. Black American fans might especially fear white economic exploitation and the deracination of their cultural contributions. This is due in large part to a long history musical and economic exploitation and the mainstream, commercial musical industry that sold rap in record numbers as solely a hardcore and gangsta genre. The commercial music industry not only sold rap in this form, it also portrayed blackness in as monoracial, exclusionary urban identity.²

All entertainers engage the role of storytelling in creating their stage persona. However, in this article I'm interested in the question of racial identity as a social construction and performed fiction. In much of commercial hip hop, blackness is often staged as one uniformed cultural expression of masculine prowess and violence, even when an artist tries to avoid being singularly categorized. In defending hip hop against the charges of being violent and misogynist, many critics, musicians and fans blame this state of affairs on the recording industry. In Byron Hurt's 2006 documentary film *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* on representations of manhood in rap, this argument is one of the guiding themes. The interviewees convincingly argue that America is historically a deeply violent and misogynist culture (the same applies to its pop culture); therefore they reason, less convincingly, that rappers who celebrate violence and female subordination should not be solely blamed on the music. Rap, they contend, replicates what the media industry already sells. The film reports that "70% of mainstream hip hop is consumed by young white men" and fits in well with a preconceived notion of minority men as being threatening. The commentators are astute and have a strong argument about rap being largely controlled by white executives in the

mainstream music industry.³ However, most of Hurt's commentators lean so heavily on issues of hypermasculinity and a racialized musical industry that the conversation never veers into questions about how notions of blackness and/or racial identity itself are assembled and deployed via mass entertainment.

That question is taken up by the text under investigation—which comes from Hollywood rather than the music world—by using the narrative form to think about the issue of racial identity and representation in hip-hop music, especially as a pop culture product. The film *CB4* (1993) contemplates the performative element of identity formation. It is a critique of monoracial black culture and the media's complicity in attempting to perpetuate it. *CB4* does this via a seemingly orthodox "Hollywood" comedy using the Los Angeles gangsta rap culture to show how we play race and how identity becomes hardened ideology.⁴ The story is structured around literal acts of musical and cinematic performance, which are translated into commentaries on the process of ontological performance to counter essentialist discourses. Inauthenticity itself fuels the film. *CB4* presents a spectrum of subjectivities to show that identity ultimately amounts to performance—walking the walk and talking the talk.

One of the most famous articulations of this idea is found in Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Butler states, the "subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* [of those enforced discourses and gestures, so] it is only within the practice of repetitive signifying that a subversion of [the imposed] identity becomes possible."⁵ One "performs" an identity using the available manufactured codes and meanings, but a heightened parodic performance of the naturalized role will aggravate the disjunction between "original" and "imitation" to expose the former as a fiction. Thus, the "reconceptualization of identity as an *effect* . . . opens up possibilities of 'agency' . . . foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed."⁶ A recognizable identity is ultimately the successful *performance* of a recognizable identity. Nevertheless, individual subjectivity remains malleable even after the rules governing the "authentic" are mapped. Butler does not go so far to claim anyone can fully pass for any identity. Nor does she deny the strong institutional, social and cultural influences on our identities. Structures she contends can police our identity options. In spite of structural barriers she still finds a level of agency in our ability to manipulate the codes presented to us. "[T]here is an 'outside' to what is constructed by discourse," she writes, "but this is not an absolute 'outside,' an ontological thereness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of discourse."⁷ Even within a highly structured society or cultural space, the very fact that it *is* structured means people can enact a conscious involvement in recreating an identity by maneuvering the expectations without blindly adhering to imposed stereotypes.

CB4 satirizes the music industry and the hip-hop performer persona by having three friends (Albert, Euripides and Otis) become successful gangsta-rappers based on reputations as genuine street thugs, replete with prison records

and the other signs of authenticity one needed to make it in this rap genre of the late 1980s-early 1990s. By recreating themselves as MC Gusto, Dead Mike and Stab Master Arson, singing about violence, sexual prowess and the desperation of ghetto life with a threatening swagger, CB4 is a success with black and white kids alike. There's just one problem: CB4's members are all nice middle-class kids who know nothing about a gang-banging life.⁸

The issue of appropriating a transgressive identity based on "urban blackness" is at the center of *CB4*'s story to question the reification of African American racial identity, yet the gesture is not restricted to non-white fans. The imagined ghetto of the film is a space of multiracial desire for a rebellious difference. It weakens the sting of castigating nonwhite rappers and fans for treating "the ghetto [as] a source for white authenticity."⁹ To show the turn to otherness has no racial boundaries doesn't mean all outsiders come from the same place or can achieve the same results. Nor does it mean the intentions are always different because of race or that a person cannot shake off the identity within which one was raised. That skin color isn't enough otherness for CB4 means their need for difference also includes a class element. The middle-class protagonists are depicted behaving like successful gangsta musicians rather than actual street thugs. Nonetheless, the signifiers of impoverishment are used to bolster the performative aspects of the characters' identities and provide the band a degree of acceptance in this space as shown through their record sales. The gangsta image itself isn't given much credence, so the sociological axiom defending that image—"the ghetto badman posture-performance is a protective shell against real unyielding and harsh social policies and physical environments"—is critiqued, thereby reducing ghetto style to just another costume people can choose to wear or another marketing tool to increase your sales numbers.¹⁰

The film's attack on rap stereotypes—their naturalization and eager consumption by the audience—can be enlarged by reading it as a simultaneous attack on self-enforced racial boundaries. In his critique of hip-hop fans' racial essentialism, Greg Tate chastises such conformist expectations of blackness as analogous to slavery:

Like the antebellum slavery system and the American religion of racism that evolved from it, hip hop's audience demands black bodies do the dirty work of sustaining hip hop's authenticity. The racial imaging of hip hop through mass media, coupled with an apparent desire on the part of the hip hop audience for a pure black form, has advanced a kind of pre-emptive ethnic cleansing in hip hop that grows more extreme across time.¹¹

In *CB4* the band recognizes this enduring stereotype and manipulates the racial expectations by playing to it, indeed overplaying, their roles as gangstas according

to the established criteria taken to be the “real” thing. This mirrors the strategies of gangsta rappers that the film critiques.

Our first indication that *CB4* is interested in exploring the boundaries of identity occurs during the opening credits. The camera slowly pans through an imagined museum of rap in which seminal albums and performers are showcased. Included in the displays are familiar signifiers of the past such as the chunky gold necklaces, hats and glasses of Run-DMC and one of the large clocks worn by Flavor Flav from Public Enemy. But the most telling “artifact” is saved for last: a T-shirt with white rappers, the Beastie Boys, posing with Run-DMC. These two groups are commonly situated in rap/rock history as the bands that made rap more accessible to a white audience: Run-DMC’s cover of the rock act Aerosmith’s “Walk This Way” and the Beastie Boys’ *Licensed to Ill*, layering rap’s lyrical delivery over rock guitar and drums, were both chart-toppers in 1986. Thus the film’s opening history lesson ends with a very conscious nod to racial and cultural crossover, which disputes the characterization of rap as only a “black thing.” Roiling the waters of cultural purity is the film’s subject and its goal, but not primarily as a peace mission to open space for more nonblacks in hip hop. That is a secondary benefit of *CB4*’s first concern: broadening the meaning of blackness.

The next scene finds the band in the office of their manager, Trustus Jones, where they are about to watch the rough cut of a documentary on *CB4* by a white director known only as “A. White” (a joke name counterbalanced by the band’s leader [played by stand-up comedian Chris Rock] Albert Brown’s name equating to “A. Brown”). This comic device broaches the subject of white fetishization of black marginality—a tradition in American culture spanning nineteenth-century minstrelsy to Norman Mailer’s “White Negro” and beyond—used by contemporary observers to explain the popularity of rap among white suburbanites. A similar note is sounded later when a white music-video director states, “I just love that I-don’t-give-a-damn hip-hop attitude. It’s so real.” The predominantly white-controlled media’s construction of African-American rebellion, what it demands from its employees, is highlighted in these scenes and may explain the celebrity interviews we see on A. White’s videotape. Ice Cube and Eazy-E (from the band the film parodies, N.W.A. [Niggaz With Attitude]) are “real” West Coast gangsta rappers who grant *CB4* authenticity just by not calling them fakes. Ice T, the original gangster rapper, goes further, “I’m hard-core. . . . Then I heard these motherfuckers *CB4*. These motherfuckers is real, G! . . . What the fuck I’m supposed to do now, man?” The piece ends with the Butthole Surfers, an acid-punk band quite out of place in this lineup, as a knowing wink to the audience that concedes the joke and seemingly reinstates the rappers’ credibility after mocking it. Does this mean gangsta rappers were always in on the joke, their stories of hard-core life just a pose to sell records? Yes, partly, but later we’ll see that’s certainly not how they talked about it at the time.

Inserted in the middle, Flavor Flav from New York’s Public Enemy is the only one who calls *CB4* out as “perpetrators.” Perhaps dividing the West and East

Coasts reveals the filmmakers' personal taste for pre-gangsta rap (the movie closes with the band singing the first nationwide rap hit, 1979's "Rapper's Delight"); as such it might be a blind spot accidentally exposing how preferences enter into one's perspective, hence one's identity (an issue to be addressed with regard to the conclusion). In the movie's world, to make the "real" gangstas, for whom this genre is their contribution to cultural history, unable to differentiate a *poseur* challenges their authority. The film is released after the gangsta style has taken over rap, as the big money-maker companies wanted more of these bands which might explain the film as presenting them as tools of commercialization caught in a power relationship with the media's systemization of dangerous blackness; thus, the L.A. folk tell A. White what he wants to hear. Inside and outside the movie's world they come across as people willing to do anything for money and celebrity. Should we then infer that Rock and company think there is an authentic rap—a truer, more sincere form—and that it hails from its original birthplace on the other side of the country?

Or is the answer found in seeing it's *all* just a joke? As a satire, *CB4* must wear its own costume to make itself recognizable. In order to perform its own generic identity the interviews are deployed to establish its guise of satirical humor: it's funny that the L.A. rappers give the stamp of credibility to fake gangstas. The next level of the joke then becomes arguing over authenticity in the first place. These people are all performers of some sort; they are all paid fakers of one stripe or another just by being in the movie and reading someone else's words. Flavor Flav represents the other side but why should we listen to him, even after disregarding the goofy clothes he wears in the scene and his acting like as a pampered star? The Butthole Surfers come from the punk/independent rock scene where commercial success is an alien concept (occasionally someone hits it big but it's rare), yet indie sincerity is pushed aside to lie for a camera making a fake documentary (a film genre *based* on truth). Reinstating the L.A. rappers' authenticity is itself a joke. That one even cares is a joke, because from outside the fake "real" world of cinema it's all unreal. Inside the movie's world, authenticity is celebrated; outside we are to hold it all in suspicion.

The meaning of this gesture goes beyond a quick laugh as it eases the audience into the film's commentary on performative identity. The three friends want to be a rap group so they mimic different stylistic approaches, but success only comes with the right marketable costume and voice. The true diversity of rap is comically displayed in the montage of the different styles the guys adopt. That none of these constitute a final hip-hop identity is supported by all the real bands who reject and incorporate the signifiers of "urban blackness" as suits their needs rather than capitulating to industry or audience cultural expectations. Examples drawn from the period preceding the film's release would include the original rise of West Coast gangsta rap with N.W.A. as an aggressive, raw alternative to many New York City bands (as epitomized in 1988's *Straight Outta Compton*). But in New York, one could point to De La Soul's critique of rap's masculine stereotypes on *3 Feet High and Rising* (1989), while they, the Beastie Boys (Paul's

Boutique [1989]) and the politically charged Public Enemy (It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back [1988]) all took rap to uncharted sonic territory to keep the music from ossifying into safe, predictable forms.¹² The problem was never one of a lack of diversity within the genre itself, but a lack of support from hip-hop fans and record labels that would allow different acts to have more influence on changing the face of music and disabling the enforced assumptions (a problem for every creative medium). The question the movie asks the audience to consider is why *CB4* is able to succeed. The answer is simply that they meet the superficial conventions of the gangsta genre: cursing, misogyny, a garish show of wealth and adoration of money, a tough-talking discourse of violence, and a threatening posture intended to frighten the center (i.e., mostly white folks). Obviously none of these things define blackness as they all tell the history of how America's ruling group behaves (mostly white folks again). All the more troubling then, regardless of how utterly predictable, that gangsta rap chose to make these values the core of its public self. This is why *CB4* uses the gangsta's show business identity as a metaphor of the functioning of racial identity writ large; namely, the problem of a lone form of subjectivity becoming dominant and shrinking the field of possibility—a message relevant to every human being within every category of being.

The recurring demand made by gangsta audiences is one of authenticity, of how sartorial and aural style have to match one's biography, and it is the source of Albert's inner conflict. His success disappears if the band's lack of street credibility is exposed, yet he is also losing touch with his family and girlfriend. By using shame to make Albert give up his new identity, to act like his former self, the representatives of the domestic space symbolize another type of coercive interpellation that enforces rules of subjectivity. Albert's father, a plumber who has worked hard to move his family to the suburbs, accuses his son of being ashamed of him and states that only somebody who wasn't from the streets "would think it was something to glorify."¹³ The father moralizes on the dangers of the thug life and his son's lack of experience with it to embarrass him back into the family's belief system of middle-class achievement. This is not so much an ethical statement about one's "right" to perform an identity as it is a strategy to keep Albert within bounds of the one in which his father has invested to understand himself. The gesture is repeated in the next scene when the "real" MC Gusto (the local criminal whose identity has been appropriated by Albert, although Gusto would call it stolen) denies Albert's legitimacy with his claim to be "three generations deep in gangsterdom." So, is there a true identity that Albert is denying or Gusto is protecting? Are subjects required to live according to the dominant cultural identity of the social space into which they are born? The film says no, but with a caveat in its concluding scene that presents a mild form of hybridity as a strategy to evade choosing between totalized subjectivities in creating a self.

These exchanges represent maneuvers to guard the borders of identity and prevent destabilization. The main difference between the performer and one claiming to be born into a cultural role is that the latter is unaware of its con-

structed quality which seems real due to immersion and repetition. One can easily imagine extreme scenarios to show the limitations of this theory, the point is that every identity has certain imitable characteristics and in a different environment there is a different sense of what constitutes the natural. As symbolized by their success, the film wants us to assume CB4 has won the game in its own context of gangsta rap. Albert's choice to look like a ghetto thug, becoming what his father strove to leave behind, contests the father's narrative of success—what one should properly desire and strive for—so the father loses one of his comparative markers necessary for defining and rationalizing who he is to himself as the only truth. The same applies to Gusto, only it's the life he still lives, so any sense of uniqueness he holds from his association with the gangster identity—like the father it is the only way he can make sense of himself—is now reduced by Albert into the mere details of a character type: costume, body language, speaking style and vocabulary. Clothing, behavior and musical taste are weak points for believing in authenticity because it only requires that one learn, mimic and obey the rules of the style more accurately. Johan Fornäs theorizes that focusing on authenticity is less fruitful than considering such details in the light of contextualized self-reflexivity and the relationship an individual has to a text-object, such that “authenticity appears as an option and a construction rather than as a given fact.”¹⁴ One's sense of belonging is therefore freed from a romantic conception of natural origin or purity; instead, it's seen as circulating according to localized rules that create the boundaries used to define authenticity.

The need to exclude is the first order of *any* reified identity. But if nothing is wired in the blood, authenticity is nothing more than a collection of rules about the details (ever more nuanced to restrict membership), and cultural belonging requires only studying, copying and performing those details correctly. Moreover, the argument about not having the proper “lived reality” (also common in rock cultures like punk that celebrate a class-based anti-suburbanism) limits black existence to one model; consequently, African Americans who do not match the version of blackness deployed in a style like gangsta rap may themselves feel like interlopers who must buy the signifiers of a racial identity that was already a construct and now a commodity. When an identity is denaturalized into a mode of repeated performance and historicized codes it ceases to be the mystical, preordained outcome of blood and ancestry. (It is never completely free of these factors, but neither does it have to be completely beholden to them.) And that can make true believers very angry. There have been moments when things appeared ready to change in hip hop, such as a period in the late 1990s when preppy (read: white, conservative, wealthy) fashion was appropriated and recontextualized from an inner-urban vantage point. Michicko Kakutani read it as expressing a desire for the American Dream, Russell Simmons saw a form of symbolic escape from the ghetto.¹⁵ I'm sure more than one kid bought the clothes and had a revelation about the idea of whiteness as a cultural invention with its own meaning-imbuéd costume, but the larger impact never made it past hip-hop fans once again being represented as desiring the symbols of a “white” affluence.

CB4's act of denaturalization challenges the notion of "blackness" itself. The film parades out a series of stereotypes: an Afrocentrist charlatan; the hard-working father who takes care of his family; the hoochie girl of rap videos; the criminal; the intelligent journalist; and the gaudy entrepreneur who flashes his wealth. These are only a few characters who serve to weaken simplified ideas of what it means to be an African American beyond skin tone. One early scene in particular makes this point about heterogeneity as Albert and his girlfriend Daliha watch music videos. Daliha is portrayed as a sweet and innocent middle-class girl, one who dresses more like a suburban hippie in Birkenstock sandals and speaks with a valley girl accent—hardly a bosom-bearing groupie with a "ghetto" argot. Albert prefers the "keepin' it real" rappers but she likes Lenny Kravitz, who is associated with rock rather than anything officially categorized as "black music" (due to the veil of marketing and fans' ignorance of rock's roots). Additionally, the whole family likes to watch Wacky D (a parody of MC Hammer) dance in his shiny balloon pants. There are at least five different versions of blackness in this scene and they all contradict each other to upend a singularized notion of racial identity. A more subtle symbol of ontological suturing and fragmentation is Albert's car: one side is clean (Albert's lived suburban/"normal" image), the other rusted and dented (Albert's desire for the ghetto/"abnormal" image). The bifurcation of the car represents Albert's own split sense of self. The competing sources result in his being two sides of the same coin; such that depending on which side you are viewing you are liable to jump to a closed set of conclusions, but when taken together you have the complete, contradictory person. If subjects (and their personal identities) are understood as partially the products of a sociocultural function, then a degree of variability and willful transformation become options with subjectivity, likewise the possibility of destabilizing systems of classification.

A sampling of anti-identitarian approaches shed light on *CB4*'s actions, stressing the diversity and agency of racial identity. From the performance studies camp, Harry Elam's assessment of the "postblack" gesture in contemporary African-American cultural production highlights its refusal to be restrained by monoracial boundaries of authentic identity as ordained by the Black Arts Movement of the sixties and seventies.¹⁶ Likewise, in *Appropriating Blackness*, E. Patrick Johnson censures the idea of racial authenticity on the grounds that "'blackness' does not belong to any one individual or group. . . . When black Americans have employed the rhetoric of black authenticity, the outcome has often been a political agenda that has excluded more voices than it has included."¹⁷ He notes a parallel between racial representation and performativity:

"Blackness" and "performance" complement one another in a dialectic that becomes an ontology of racialized cultural production. "Blackness," for instance, is a simulacrum until it is practiced—i.e., performed. The epistemological moment of race manifests itself in and through performance in that

performance facilitates self- and cultural reflexivity—a knowing made manifest by a “doing.” Far from undergirding an essentialist purview of blackness, performance, as a mode of representation, emphasizes the ways in which cultures struggle to define who they are and who they want to be.¹⁸

K. Anthony Appiah adds to this by questioning the idea of a unified black culture, “African-American culture, if this means shared beliefs, values, practices, does not exist: what exists are African-American cultures.”¹⁹ He explores the function of a dominant racial identity and its comforting myth of a unified culture: “Once the racial label is applied to people, ideas about what it refers to, ideas that may be much less consensual than the application of the label, come to have their social [and psychological] effects . . . and they shape the ways people conceive of themselves and their projects.”²⁰ He insists that subjects have agency in the degree with which they identify with a racial label, with the amount of credence they give it, and how they will organize their lives and sense of self in relation to it.²¹ Finally, Phillip Brian Harper voices concern about hip hop “promulgating problematic social and political positions—sexism, homophobia, a certain type of class narrowness that troubled me—and that it was promulgating these in the name of ‘authentic’ blackness.”²² Thus, an official notion of blackness, akin to an essentialized rap identity, functions as an imposed stereotype meant to cordon off the boundaries of identity.

Throughout most of the film, *CB4* exhibits an ability to maneuver around its own cinematic essentialisms through the mask of a silly movie meant only to entertain.²³ The ending, however, seems to take us somewhere else. After all the conflicts have been settled and the happy ending is near, *CB4* puts on one final show. Before taking the stage, A. White asks them what the future holds. Albert looks at the camera and speaks directly to the audience with a sincere tone when he replies, “I’m just going to be plain old Albert.” That sounds like a closing note of support for the idea of a unique self, except the band is still dressed in their gangsta prison outfits (Albert has removed the Jheri-curl wig)—despite the convention of a tidy Hollywood ending (a stereotype) they are still playing at being *CB4*, so plain old Albert is nowhere to be found. But we do have what could be called a hybrid Albert, someone who stakes his identity on the margins of both the suburbs and the ghetto, which may be what *CB4* finally offers as a happy ending. To then further complicate matters, the closing credits make a case for contradiction in the deceptively simple choice to replay movie shots with an R&B soundtrack. This meshes with the film’s statement about racial multiplicity as it constitutes a different musical “identity,” but it also represents the film’s take on having to move within the industrial borderlines of Hollywood conventions. Imani Perry describes the non-threatening R&B genre as rap’s alter ego and Chris Rock has ridiculed it in a parody song, such responses explain how including the tune speaks to Hollywood’s demand for broad audience appeal.²⁴ And just when things get comfortable, just when it would all seem to be

over, everything switches on the audience. They are shown grainy documentary style footage of a burned out urban ghetto (graffiti, condemned buildings, the homeless) accompanied by a voice-over delivered by Chuck D (the leader of the politically radical band Public Enemy) that preaches about the blackness of hardcore rap and white parents' fear of "cultural overthrow," then finishes the credits with tougher sounding rap songs. The gesture transgresses cinematic essentialism at the same time it acknowledges diversity; that rap remains the final privileged style recognizes how one makes choices in identity construction that necessarily shut out certain options even as it mixes others, so we can theorize that what takes form is different for each individual.

More significantly, the Chuck D voice-over seemingly contradicts the possibility of hybridity we first see in the opening celebration of hip hop's border-crossing at the rap museum. To understand how *CB4* maneuvers this problem we need to note the final rap mix includes Public Enemy as well as the Beastie Boys. That choice goes against Chuck D's claim that rap is exclusively "black," but without dismissing hip hop's predominantly African-American roots in terms of both a broader cultural history and the context of its birth. The assertion of purity is complicated first by the form itself since the music is a *mélange* of samples from a variety of musicians, including white ones. The entire history of American popular music (not just since the mid-1950s) has been about appropriations, borrowings and syncretism (not always legally or with benevolent intentions). Therefore, some of those sources had long ago borrowed from forms not categorized as white, so they are first- or second-order hybrids well *before* hip hop integrates them into its own style. Stuart Hall takes the position that "in black popular culture . . . there are no pure forms at all. Always these forms are the product of partial synchronization, of engagement across cultural boundaries . . . to some degree hybridized from a vernacular base."²⁵ The genesis of rap in the mid-1970s Bronx has a greater claim to nonwhite racial ownership if only because it was still being born in a localized underground, albeit strong Latino involvement is the second factor that problematizes casting it as an exclusively African-American form.²⁶ Additionally, Dick Hebdige offers an account of early rap's transnational Caribbean roots (DJ toasting and the Jamaican sound system), which leans on the side of a pan-African connection some may read as showing racial cohesion, yet others are left pondering how equivocal hip hop's blackness is; especially once it moves from the underground into the daylight of being a marketable commodity on MTV, the music charts and in clothing stores.²⁷

Imani Perry concedes all these points about the problem of cultural essentialism even as she dismisses them in her defense of calling rap "black" music. "Why can't something be black (read, *black American*) and be influenced by a number of cultures and styles at the same time?" she asks. "To deem something French or English rarely implies that there were no Germanic cultural influences, or Irish, or even Algerian. Why, then, is it so troubling to define something as black?" Perry omits the distinction between national and racial identity. If hip hop were being excluded from the "American" cultural catalog, then she would

have an issue, but no one does that, not even those who ask how hip hop's American identity transforms as it crosses the globe and makes contact with different cultures, different histories. Her defensive point about distant, forgotten cultural influences carries less weight from a transnationalist approach that asks those exact questions about murky textual origins in order to deconstruct closed nationalist categories, especially when they are used to support closed racial categories. Perry's desire to mark hip hop as a "mostly-distinctly" black form eventually resorts to strategic essentialism to find a compromise; thus, she promotes a perspective recognizing the way hip hop is forced into "a black political and social existence . . . [by] existing within society as black music" while still "assum[ing] that black music is and has always been hybrid."²⁸

Oliver Wang's work on Asian-American hip hop follows Perry's lead on the issue of showing a balanced respect for rap's blackness:

Hip-hop can have its roots in Blackness yet also be the product of cultural encounters from outside Afro-diasporic influences. . . . In this understanding, the term "Black" does not presume there is a 100 percent authentic Blackness out there any more than there is a 100 percent authentic "Asian Americanness" out there (the latter identity was a construction from its very inception as a term). However, understanding and appreciating hip hop's syncretic roots does not fundamentally change its relationship—especially in the popular imagination—to Blackness.

In the end, however, blackness trumps syncretism for Perry, "[T]hat crossroads space became defined through politics and the cultural identity of the form by its blackness, not its crossroads nature."²⁹ Her chicken-or-the-egg formulation of the question is not off the mark, for blackness has been the defining attribute in hip hop's promotion as a cultural product and defamation as a cultural threat. Greg Tate is hardly an easygoing advocate of cultural crossover but shows a guarded approval of its potentiality:

Though the much-maligned "wigger" figure mimics the surface forms of African American culture (i.e. the songs, the speech, the dress codes and the bad attitude of hip-hop), his more sophisticated brethren have . . . made us understand how influence and appropriation can cut both ways across the racial divide. These are white artists who found ways to express the complexity of American whiteness inside Black musical forms.³⁰

Appropriation, borrowing and quotation are productive when the form changes through contact, pushing the forms past their origins, in order to create new forms instead of just uninspired imitation—such mimicry is the source of CB4's

marketing triumph but artistic failure. Musical transformation parallels malleable identity as a state of becoming rather than being. Perry, on the other hand, argues, “[T]he borrowing of rap by white rock acts smacks of a performative inauthenticity because it occupies neither the political nor the cultural space of rap” so visitors are required to display an “embrace of both the aesthetic and political location of blackness.”³¹ This redlining of genres tells outsiders they must not venture into “our” cultural neighborhood essentially because they don’t look like us, therefore they don’t feel or think like us. Would she also erect artistic border stations to keep African Americans within if they try straying to other parts of town searching for sources unavailable on their home turf? To understand hybrid musical forms requires audiences to readjust their listening paradigms by letting go of the original as the purist basis of evaluation since the forms inevitably *transform*. For Perry to describe hip hop as “situationally black” seems sensible enough except that it risks making the problem the answer, thereby sustaining a restricted conception of blackness as the normative model for monitoring hip hop’s parameters of authenticity: how it can sound and look, how it can be used, what it can mean; in short, the quintessential defensive tactic a dominant culture uses against its challengers.³²

CB4’s success contends that the allegation of appropriating an “urban” cultural style is applicable to anyone who *chooses* to adopt it, regardless of their racial or economic background, because it is never the only option, no matter how “natural” it feels. As Oliver Wang states, a nonblack person’s hip-hop fandom is not an “inherently libratory action” granting access to deep cultural understanding; however, by that account we should not assume that every African American engages rap with a sincere heart and the best of intentions.^{33,34} The film uses that conflict as its narrative center and builds upon the work of a real band who manipulated a negative image foisted on them by the dominant culture so as to sell it back to their children. *CB4* is based on the third (maybe fourth) phase in hip hop’s evolution, when gangsta rap built on the hardcore sound of bands like Public Enemy and KRS-One/Boogie Down Productions to announce the West Coast had its own style, tales and problems unique to their experience. The model for CB4 is N.W.A., the band who became the tough face attached to the West Coast sound and attitude. They proclaimed Compton—a Los Angeles suburb with an African-American majority—the home of gangsta rap in their 1988 song “Straight Outta Compton” (which *CB4* parodies) and made “the” black experience one of misogyny, violence, inner-city misery and injustice at the hand of white cops in songs like ‘Fuck tha Police’ and ‘Gangsta Gangsta.’” Russell Potter believes this persona, “Signifies on white fears about black culture; its building blocks are stereotypes, and yet the ultimate effect of heaping them up is to render the stereotype untenable.”³⁵ Potter’s approach can be partially mated to Butlerian parody in reading the band’s image and imagery as so excessive, so over-the-top, that one is forced to question if they are joking. N.W.A. wasn’t telling as they became the subject of a national controversy that helped their album go double-platinum.

In his study of Compton, Josh Sides quotes a member of N.W.A. later confessing to the band's self-conscious use of the ghetto persona to give themselves a better marketing edge rather than presenting the reality of "their" experience on the mean streets: "It's just an image. We got to do something that would distinguish ourselves. We was just trying to be different."³⁶ Despite the drug-dealing past of the band's leader Eazy-E, their dangerous image was not wholly accurate; in fact, Ice Cube (one of the front men) came from a middle-class home and studied drafting at an Arizona college. Eithne Quinn offers a different perspective on N.W.A.'s members with middle-class status: They "were too close to the difficult and deteriorating lived experience . . . [of gang members] to be accused of simple posturing."³⁷ For Quinn the image is more real (read: authentic) which is how most fans, pundits and reporters took it. And they aren't entirely at fault. The group is definitely performing an identity and playing with its signifiers, but I am less inclined to view it as the postmodern spectacle that Potter does since the *public* image of N.W.A. is decidedly unplayful in its marketing of a quite unfragmented, unironic subjectivity. To call it a case of misreading ignores how their exaggerated thug subjectivity was backed up by them through their own statements and actions at the time (several arrests for assault); the critical facet of parody that would work to undermine the form (i.e., their gangsta identity) was not part of the product they sold. They did not invert the negative stereotype of the threatening black man, they heightened it and packaged it as reality without reversing previous racist caricatures through a parody of ignorant criminality. Writing more recently—after hip hop became the cultural dominant—Paul Gilroy undermines an investment in rap's transgression. He argues that the genre's "marginality is now as official and routinized as its overblown defiance, even if the music and its matching life-style are still being presented—marketed—as outlaw forms."³⁸ There is a constant anxiety about "keeping it real" (of not misrepresenting yourself and your background) because any assumption of inauthenticity would have hurt N.W.A.'s sales, which are linked to consumer expectations regarding the representation of inner-urban identity; thus "NWA [sic] did not invent images from the streets of Compton, but rather selectively filtered them in a way to deliver the most sensational and shocking impression to listeners."³⁹ The more urgent issue is how this identity comes to reify African-American subjectivity by establishing a borderline marking the limits of true blackness as poor, violent, decadent, lewd and materialistic. *CB4* fills the gap by enacting N.W.A.'s missing critical parody to call out the link between style and public perception.

Linda Hutcheon defines parody as a repetition that marks difference, an "imitation with critical ironic distance, whose irony can cut both ways."⁴⁰ At its most basic level, parody itself is just another type of performance, an act of donning a mask to imitate a style, a form, an appearance. One of the more profound results of parodic imitation, therefore, is the potentially risible demystification, thus a mocking denaturalization, of style as performance in showing that it can indeed be mimicked, copied and rehearsed—just like "acting your race." *CB4*

laughs at documentaries (placing it in the comic genre of the mockumentary with *The Rutles* [1978] and *This Is Spinal Tap* [1984]), parodies N.W.A.'s music video and riffs on films like Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992) and the drug-gang film *New York City* (1991). Style and scenes are borrowed from both, but the latter is more resonant since Chris Rock played a crackhead in *New Jack City*. Considering how the African-American drug addict is an all-too-prevalent cliché in young black urban dramas, the desire to criticize it may be the only way of reading the sudden intrusion of Rock mimicking, indeed actually *replaying*, the scene where he lights a crack pipe while wearing an American flag shirt. The moment is a serious test of the audience's ability to suspend disbelief because there is absolutely no explanation for this scene in *CB4*: Albert is suddenly using crack? It pokes fun at Rock's role in *New Jack City* (Allen Payne, playing Euripides, was also in it) but is more useful as a critique of the typical film roles available to African Americans, and the accompanying claim they are presenting racial authenticity, as the parody undermines any modicum of reality the film may have desired to establish.

The importance of parody to the film's purpose is all the more emphasized through two of its white characters: the politician Virgil Robinson and his son. Robinson needs an issue to win the election and gets the idea of latching onto the moral panic surrounding gangsta rap after witnessing his son repeating the physical gestures and language from a *CB4* video (which is already a parody of N.W.A.'s self-staging). The son's fandom is expressed through mimicry—as an uncritical parody in copying the style—and the politician manipulates white anxiety over that transformation of subjectivity with his own mimicry. Robinson becomes a parody of a conservative-family-values politician, he *performs* as expected to get re-elected with speeches propped up by self-righteous morality and racist fear-mongering without really being concerned about the issue. The father plays to the interests of bourgeois whiteness, presenting himself as its defender. The son, on the other hand, embodies cultural mixture, which is likewise biologically suggested by the off-white color of his darker, olive skin.

All this critical parody better situates an interpretation of the grainy, "hard truth" conclusion to *CB4* as an extension of the critique rather than its reversal. Like Butler's theory of parodic performativity, it's possible the documentary form at the end becomes just another style, just another pose, just another mask of honesty that should not be taken at face value.⁴¹ Yet the face, or more specifically the skin and the clothes that cover it, is precisely what *CB4* exposes as the means to a successful presentation of identity. If *CB4*'s authenticity is invalidated, the fans will reject them (hence Albert's fear when a journalist threatens to delve into his background). Ridiculing rap fans' adoration of the Real and the lines drawn to distinguish it situates it as a condoned posture, a set of assumptions open to mimicry, and this applies to racial, class and gender identities as well (the last is addressed when Albert successfully pulls off dressing as a woman to trap MC Gusto). Depicting the mass culture audience in the film as dupes carries a parallel accusation of how we have all been duped by monolithic identities.

CB4 recognizes how any culture is an invention, and it expresses the idea through a thematic meditation on performance theory, wherein (en)acting stereotypes (especially those drawn from popular culture) becomes the critical point itself. In essence, it's a movie—a fake story with fake people—and you have to confront your own willingness to take the ride into the fake, even beyond the notion of a suspension of disbelief, and then ask how much credence you give to the notion of naturalized identities across the board alongside the truths to which cultures demand your allegiance. The question of authenticity finally becomes less relevant, and less interesting, in this movie since the characters' behavior draws on a chain of performances shaping a subjectivity that extends all the way back to those non-performers the gangsta rappers use as a model for their own staged (i.e., professional) authenticity.⁴² The markers of this version of blackness and "black" toughness have been learned from the media representation of black masculinity sold in gangsta rap. So, does Albert (as a middle-class black) represent cultural robbery, or is it more a case of choosing a product from a shelf in the identity supermarket? Eric Watts vehemently argues the latter:

The influence of market consumption on rap artistry is patently denied by the oft-repeated assertion of street authenticity [and honest description]. This refutation not only obscures corporate power, but it reifies a dangerous social equation. As rappers depict themselves as prowling "niggas," their popularity . . . relies on their "authenticating" these performances. And so black manhood is degraded within the dynamic interstitiality of "ghettonomics."⁴³

Others, of course, place more of the blame on the other side.

CB4 closes with a "true identity" discourse in which Albert claims he will be true to himself. We should be hesitant, however, about taking the statement of transcendent selfhood as the final word on the issue. The film seemingly draws back from its previous take on identity in the ending, so does it just chicken out or is it delivering the final part of its message? *CB4*'s dénouement resorts to a typical Hollywood ending in that the main characters are happy and all their problems are resolved. It is Hollywood's own performance of its authentic inauthenticity. If we substitute the generic demands of Hollywood for the larger society, the ending works as the final joke. The mainstream Hollywood conventions, traditions and expectations about what constitutes an acceptable (i.e., successful) film mirror the demands of society and community that pull on you and may pull you back to living a "true" self as defined for you. No matter how hard you push against the limits, the threat of being sucked back into the fold of the dominant narrative is always present. Judith Butler's parodic performativity speaks to how the film critiques Hollywood from the inside even as it obeys its normalizing rules.

The “I” who would oppose its construction [as a subject interpellated by an external structure] is always in some sense drawing from that construction to articulate its opposition; further, the “I” draws what is called its “agency” in part through being implicated in the very relations of power that it seeks to oppose. To be *implicated* in the relations of power, indeed, enabled by the relations of power that the “I” opposes is not, as a consequence, to be reducible to their existing forms.⁴⁴

Thus, we are bludgeoned with the generic Hollywood ending, where all loose strings are neatly tied up and contradictions smoothed over. Yet the happy ending starts to look more like Butler’s transgressive parody—another self-conscious mask—than a heartfelt, uplifting belief in a transparent self.

One might just dismiss *CB4* as an imperfect example, albeit one that indicates a theoretical potentiality; however, that does not do justice to its cultural work. There is no denying that the characterization of hip-hop identity becomes ever more cartoonish as the film proceeds, but so does the “real thing” if you watch and listen to enough of it. Additionally, the film is a comedy drawing from satire and parody, genres with their own version of identity rules. Disjunction, misdirection, odd juxtapositions; these are the tools of humor, but they are also the techniques for recreating an identity freed from the center. The critique of rap stereotypes—their deployment and consumption by performers and a mass audience—can be enlarged by reading them as simultaneous attacks on the self-enforced boundaries of all identities. As a statement on subjectivity they call attention to how all the film’s characters should be considered overdone, superficial characterizations; yet ones that challenge each of us to question the stability of our own sense of self.

Notes

1. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, “Rap, Black Rage, and Racial Difference” *Enculturation* 2, no. 2 (1999), <<http://www.drstevebest.org/Essays/RapBlackRage.htm>> (20 December 2009).

2. Hereafter the terms hip hop and rap should be read as referring to the hardcore and gangsta styles. Hardcore precedes gangsta which is the heir to its confrontational, aggressive, hard, streetwise posture in both form and lyrics. Both have their beginnings in the 1980s as counterpoints to songs about parties or MC boasting. Instead these bands offered direct political commentary (Public Enemy, KRS-One, Ice-T) including harsh, graphic stories about inner-urban existence and the criminal lifestyle. N.W.A. was the West Coast face of hardcore’s transformation into gangsta rap and their shifting emphasis on the dangerous thug lifestyle of decadence and ostentatious wealth proved extremely lucrative as consciousness-raising fell out of favor with consumers; their thematic and visual influence shaped the 1990s and still holds sway in much of today’s hip hop. For histories of Los Angeles rap, see Brian Cross, *It’s Not About a Salary—: Rap, Race and Resistance in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1993), 5-64; and Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 41-65.

3. *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, Dir. Byron Hurt (God Bless the Child Productions, 2006). While little of this critique can be denied, the fact is that the musicians in the film are saying (or hinting) they would perform different songs if there was money in it. Those who follow a creative path that veers from the mainstream yet still find fame and/or financial success without having to pander to audiences and/or executives are the true minority in the pop culture industry. This means there is only one response to the question, “Are white rappers simply attempting to get rich by appropriating a *popular* style of music?” (Paul Olson and Bernie Shobe, “White Rappers and

Black Epistemology,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 41, no. 6 [2008], 1009, emphasis added). The answer must be another question: “Isn’t that what black rappers, indeed *all* rappers, whose first goal is wealth are doing?” Isn’t that what fundamentally drives *everyone* who tries to become a rich pop star? Moreover, if the style is “popular” then how can anyone be resented for emulating it other than for a lack of artistic vision that finds a path to creating something different? And it should go without saying that the independent route is no less socially constructed as a value system, a mode of being or a method of self-perception.

4. *CB4*, Dir. Tamra Davis (Universal, 1993).

5. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 145.

6. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 147.

7. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 8.

8. Their relationship to gang culture is what Mary Patillo-McCoy labels “thrilled” in her tripartite model of middle-class black youth fandom with gang subculture—although it’s applicable to fans of any subculture (124-45). The fan is either consumed (actively participating in gang culture), thrilled (excited by the imagery, persona, etc., but distanced from actually living the life), or marginal (showing little or no interest in the subculture and its style). *Black Picket Fences: Privileges and Peril Among the Black Middle Class* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

9. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 11.

10. Rose, 12.

11. Greg Tate, “15 Arguments In Favor of the Future of Hip Hop,” in Alan Light, ed., *The VIBE History of Hip Hop* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 392.

12. Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 65-69.

13. The scene also indirectly speaks to rap’s criticism of the black bourgeoisie’s middle-class values and being confined by the demands of contributing to racial uplift; see Quinn (36-37) and Russell A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 137, 138.

14. Johan Fornäs, “Listen to Your Voice!: Authenticity and Reflexivity in Rock, Rap and Techno Music,” *New Formations* 24 (1994), 168.

15. Michiko Kakutani, “Common Threads: Why Are Homeboys and Suburbanites Wearing Each Other’s Clothes?” *New York Times Magazine*, 16 February 1997, 18, <<http://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/16/magazine/common-threads.html?pagewanted=1>> (27 December 2009).

16. Harry J. Elam, “Change Clothes and Go: A Postscript to Postblackness,” in Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Kennell Jackson, eds., *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 379-388.

17. E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 2-3.

18. E. Patrick Johnson, “The Pot Calling the Kettle ‘Black,’” *Theatre Journal* 57, no. 4 (2005), 606.

19. K. Anthony Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections,” in K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, eds., *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 95.

20. Appiah, 78.

21. Appiah, 80.

22. Phillip Brian Harper, interview, *Callaloo* 22, no. 4 (1999), 858.

23. Michael Eric Dyson offers a harsher assessment of *CB4*: “ever dumb, thoroughly crass, unrelentingly unsubtle” in *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 158. Curiously, Dyson rarely makes this criticism against gangsta rap itself except for its misogyny and homophobia, which he qualifies as problems of American society at large, 176-86.

24. Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 34.

25. Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 471.

26. See Raquel Z. Rivera, *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

27. Dick Hebdige, *Cut ‘N’ Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music* (New York: Routledge, 1987).

28. Perry, 10-11, 11.

29. Oliver Wang, “These Are the Breaks: Hip-Hop and AfroAsian Cultural (Dis)Connections,” in Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen, eds., *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 148. Perry, 15.

30. Greg Tate, "Nigs R Us, or How Blackfolk Became Fetish Objects," in Greg Tate, ed., *Everything But the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2003), 10.

31. Perry, 27.

32. Perry, 29. For an examination of how racial identity affects one's success in rap see Oliver Wang, "Rapping and Repping Asian: Race, Authenticity, and the Asian American MC," in Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, eds., *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 153. "Jin—or any other nonBlack rapper—has to convince both white and black hip-hop consumers that they are 'authentic,' despite their racial difference. Most record labels would hesitate to sign an artist unless they were reasonably assured of that." Olson and Shobe say the same: "[T]he success of white rappers depends . . . on their ability to make their audience believe that they have lived through the experiences about which they rap and really believe in the messages put forth in their music" (996). The larger problem is encapsulated in Olson and Shobe's comment "that white people would have enough lived experiences to rap about is questionable" (1009). This is problematic on two counts: (1) it defines experience only as hardship—and this one is always associated with inner-urban poverty—so no other aspect or form of life deserves contemplation and (2) elides white poverty (urban and non-urban) as an issue and the hardships that come with it. It should also be noted that this attitude is not unique to rap; for example, punk rock has always valorized the authenticity of one's experience (preferring the hardness of urban poverty—at least the appearance of it—to bland suburbia), see the two articles by Daniel S. Traber on punk and otherness. "L.A.'s 'White Minority': Punk and the Contradictions of Self-Marginalization," *Cultural Critique* 48 (2001): 30-64, and "Locating the Punk Preppy (A Speculative Theory)," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 41, no. 3 (2008): 488-508.

33. Wang, "Breaks," 156. Greg Tate reports, "What has changed since the days of Elvis is the degree to which Black American hip-hop producers function as arbiters of who is and who is not a legitimate white purveyor of hip-hop." "Nigs R Us, or How Blackfolk Became Fetish Objects," in Greg Tate, ed., *Everything But the Burden* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2003), 9. See Carl Hancock Rux for a summary of white rappers and a study of Eminem's trickster relationship to the White Negro figure in "Eminem: The New White Negro." Olson and Shobe also deal with this issue. From a different angle, I believe Walter Benn Michaels's comment on white bluesmen is applicable to rap, and why critics should stop taking their distinctions so seriously: "[S]ince a formal description of the blues requires no reference to the color of those who perform it . . . and since the very idea of a musical form is itself dependent on the possibility of imitation, it's hard to see how there can be any formal difference between black and white blues. The white musician who learns to form the chords and play the melodies is . . . no more or less committed to imitation than the black musician" (239). In "Autobiographies of the Ex-White Men: Why Race Is Not a Social Construction," in Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman, eds., *The Futures of American Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 239. The counterargument turns to racial experience as the final marker of distinction, thus falling back on essentialist assumptions. See Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), 121-144, for a more developed treatment of the issues surrounding Eminem's success.

34. Hip hop's transformation into the sound of mainstream commerciality fueled a controversial 1991 *New Republic* article that hip-hop proponents are still attacking in which David Samuels charged that hip hop isn't quite as dark as advertised: "[A]lthough rap is still proportionally more popular among blacks, its primary audience is white and lives in suburbs. . . . Since the early 1980s a tightly knit group of mostly young, middle-class, black New Yorkers, in close concert with white record producers, executives, and publicists, has been making rap music for an audience that industry executives concede is primarily composed of white suburban males." In "The Rap on Rap: The 'Black Music' That Isn't Either," *New Republic* 11 (November 1991), reprinted in *Common Culture: Reading and Writing about American Popular Culture*, Michael Petracca and Madeleine Sorapure, eds., (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1998), 279. Kitwana points out factual and historical mistakes in the article in *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop*, 81-82. 1991 is a significant year because Soundscan shifted to using a product's scanned bar code to track U.S. music sales; therefore, suburban chain stores were now included, whereas urban sales had been the previous basis for data. The new system revealed that suburbanites were buying rap in large numbers so it could no longer be resigned to the nonwhite-urban category by marketing departments at media corporations. Eithne Quinn (as well as Kitwana) offers a counter-reading of the Soundscan system as unfairly emphasizing the suburbs, thereby leaving out independent "Mom and Pop" record stores found in predominantly black neighborhoods (83).

35. Potter, 14.

36. Josh Sides, "Straight into Compton: American Dreams, Urban Nightmares, and the Metamorphosis of a Black Suburb," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2004), 597.

37. Quinn, 56.

38. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 180.

39. Sides, 597. Several critics note that gangsta performers used consciously exaggerated personas and stories, and see this as a continuation of the African-American vernacular tradition; see Quinn 22-24. Thus “nigga” is a persona as well, a performance manipulated in the commercial zone (to sell the authenticity of social reality) similar to how it’s enacted to survive the geographical social space of the ghetto itself. Compton also functions as a marketable space, one deployed to create a brand identity that sells “realness” and difference by making the ghetto a consumable product, and not just to white suburbia (see Quinn 76, 85). Cameron McCarthy, et al. in “Race, Suburban Resentment, and the Representation of the Inner City in Contemporary Film and Television,” in Michelle Fine, et al., eds., *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 236-37, comment on how “gangsta” films of the early 1990s, such as John Singleton’s critically celebrated *Boyz n the Hood*, are grounded in, and thereby reproduce, mainstream perceptions of inner-city blackness. This kind of critique has followed rap ever since it walked onto the stage of international pop culture. Political and community leaders as well as scholars have lambasted rap for promoting negative imagery and a degraded black identity; see Samuels for other examples. On a related note, the closing footage used with the Chuck D voice-over relies on the same connection—the setting isn’t necessarily “black” but definitely evokes poverty.

40. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 37.

41. Closing with the documentary style can even be read as a jab at the documentary tradition in African-American cultural production, and one that is typically attached to rap as the voice of the ghetto (Public Enemy has been lauded as the “black CNN”). Sources on the documentary form are Barbara Foley, “History, Fiction, and the Ground Between: The Uses of the Documentary Mode in Black Fiction,” *PMLA* 95 (1980): 389-403, and Valerie Smith, “The Documentary Impulse in Contemporary African-American Film,” in Gina Dent, ed., *Black Popular Culture*, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 56-64.

42. With reference to actual gangsta-style performers, if one explains it in terms of a Darwinian survival strategy it still remains a choice, but hardly one limited to acting like either an inner-city thug or a respectable suburbanite. This is not to dismiss the very real hardships of poverty and the limited options available to the lower class. However, even if they are “really” from this environment, “really” live the life they rap about, “really” acted this way before becoming famous by acting this way, gangsta is not the only persona with which they have contact. Likewise, if you want to make a lot of money and have no other opportunities except crime, you will still learn to perform like the kind of criminal you have decided to be—pimp, prostitute, drug dealer, thief, or just a general hooligan—according to the environment’s expectations of how such a person conducts himself.

43. Eric K. Watts, “An Exploration of Spectacular Consumption: Gangsta Rap as Cultural Commodity,” *Communication Studies* 48 (1997), 56. Also see Kitwana, 149.

44. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 122-23.